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Allison Collins



VSA graduates Kerry Mulhern (left) and John Goble manage a thriving storefront gallery for students

The Helen Pitt Gallery was founded in 1975 by the Student Society at the Vancouver School of Art. A gallery was secured at 163 West Pender Street (down the street from the VSA) as a vehicle for student exhibitions, with a small amount of funding derived from the school. The Student Society raised funds using student membership fees to support the gallery's operations. Renovations to the gallery were undertaken in 1976 and funding was procured to manage the space by John Goble, who wrote an application for the Federal Government's Local Initiatives Program. In the next year Kerry Mulhern and John Goble, recent graduates of the Vancouver School of Art, became the gallery's first curators. They worked with a committee of students from VSA to form exhibitions in the space.

The name Helen Pitt Gallery was chosen in recognition of a philanthropist from Vernon, BC who established a scholarship fund that supported many art students at VSA. The students had named the gallery in her honour in hopes that this might draw some further funds, to no avail. Funding the gallery was a pressure on the Student Society, and over the next few years the operation shifted from having one paid staff person to student volunteers. In 1979, a student named Stan Leak (aka Stan Lake) stepped in to run the gallery. One year later, the Helen Pitt Gallery was severed from the Vancouver School of Art, after the school re-branded itself as the Emily Carr College of Art and Design and moved to Granville Island. In order to find money to continue operating the space Leak took up residence in the gallery and began to rent the space to artists who wanted to show their work.

HEALTH DEPT.
UNIT No. I
306 ABBOTT

BUILDING

306

306

REGULAR HOURS

REGULAR HOURS

Meanwhile, in 1980, a group of interested arts community members formed a collective and a not-for-profit entity called Unit 306 Society for the Democratization of the Arts. This organization was formed in the wake of the closure of PUMPS Centre for the Arts (a vibrant, punk and performance oriented artist-run space that had hosted many shows and events from 1976-1980). After an outcry among members of the community (who wanted to see PUMPS handed over to new directors) was thwarted, Unit 306 was formed. The formation of the group was something of a political gesture. Its leadership established not-for-profit status and an ambitious constitution, and almost immediately put out a call to the community to find anyone who might want to use the society's status to support their own creative energies. The name 'Unit 306' was taken from the Unit 306 Medical Building at 306 Abbott Street where the society first held small exhibitions on the second floor. One of the earliest exhibitions at Unit 306 was the manifesto show.

In 1981, the Helen Pitt Gallery (with no funding) and Unit 306 (lacking a substantial gallery space) merged their operations, and formed Unit/Pitt. The original directors of this gallery included some from the Helen Pitt (Stan Leak) and others who were associated with Unit 306 (Andrea Anderson, Todd Davis). The act of merging brought a two-fold history to the gallery space, along with a very wide array of societal goals and foundational ideas. The gallery continued to be connected to Emily Carr through its students, but also formed ties with radical or dissenting thinking as a general ethic and an aesthetic leaning.

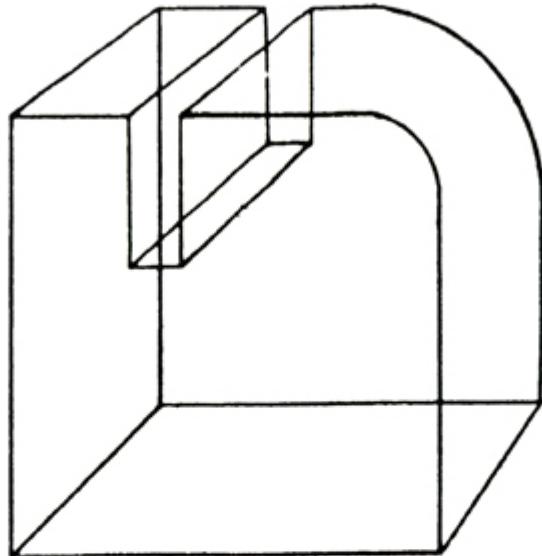
Unit 306 Society for the Democratization for the Arts also became a useful community resource. As a society with charitable status it was used as a vehicle for arts organizations that wished to apply for funding.

Early in the history of Unit/Pitt, the organization established itself as one that would thumb its nose at forms of "the establishment." It maintained a downtown gallery space, frequently hosted punk bands during the burgeoning era of the west coast punk scene. This included the 1980 exhibition "I.D." with work by students in the Interdisciplinary Studies Department and performances by U-J3Rk5 (the U-Jerks), E and the Generators. It continually exhibited emerging artists and organized many events that dealt with societal subcultures. Shows like the Dead Animal Show or Pissing on Jesus' Grave put the Pitt's directors in direct opposition to political norms, resulting in many public battles and letter writing campaigns related to freedom of speech and censorship. The space is known as something of an underdog that has championed marginal practices that sat outside the larger trends of art production. Exhibitions featuring issues of death, sex, gender, religion, and activism were common.

The Pitt also played host to other community initiatives, sharing members with the Vancouver Artists' League, a group that was behind the founding of Issue Magazine in 1983, and who organized the October Show (1983), and Warehouse Show (1984).

The Pitt went through several decades of transformation and reinvention, inclusive of eight separate moves to new gallery locations, and several name changes. From Helen Pitt Gallery (est. 1975) and Unit 306 (est. 1980) the organization became Unit/Pitt (1981), Pitt International Galleries (1984), The Pitt or Pitt Gallery (1992) and later returned to Helen Pitt Gallery (1996).

Helen Pitt Gallery
163 W. Pender St.
Vancouver, B.C. V6B 1S4



THE HELEN PITT GALLERY

UNIT/PITT GALLERY

PITT
INTERNATIONAL GALLERIES



PITT GALLERY

The changes continue today, as the next turn in curatorial and artistic direction of the gallery (and a move to a new location) has found the gallery recently rebranded as Unit/Pitt Projects.

163 Pender – Helen Pitt Gallery – 1975
306 Abbott – Unit 306 Society – 1980
163 Pender – Unit/Pitt – 1981
36 Powell – Pitt International Galleries – 1984
317 West Hastings – Pitt Gallery – 1992
822 Homer – Helen Pitt Gallery – 1996
148 Alexander – Helen Pitt Gallery Artist Run Centre – 2005
221A East Georgia – Helen Pitt Gallery (organization hosted by 221A, no gallery location for 2010)
15 Pender – Unit/Pitt Projects – 2011

Helen Pitt Gallery Founding Artists (1975-1979)

John Goble
Kerry Mulhern
Katherine Hrominchuk
Pam Jacobson
Bill Rennie
Stan Leak

Unit 306 Society for the Democratization of the Arts was founded by

Scott Watson
Avis Lang Rosenberg
Tom Roberson
Andrea Anderson

who turned the society over to

Todd Davis
Andrea Anderson
David Ostrem
Bruce Walther

and the first group to manage Unit/Pitt was

Todd Davis
Stan Leak
Andrea Anderson
Barb Daniel
Michael Harding

First Location

Helen Pitt Gallery opened in 1975 at 163 Pender Street

The original mission/mandate of the Helen Pitt Gallery

The Purposes of the Helen Pitt Gallery

(a) We feel that the gallery space should be used primarily for the exhibition of student work, but also for the exhibition of artwork by instructors or graduates of the Vancouver School of Art and outside artists who can provide a significant contribution by showing their work.

(b) Part of the space (that is, the room farthest from the Pender Street entrance) should be used as a lounge area for the members of the Vancouver School of Art Student Society.

The original constitution of Unit 306

I. The name of the society shall be:

UNIT 306: Society for the Democratization of the Arts.

II. The purposes of the society are:

- a) to promote and encourage a free flow of discussion about art activities and their relevance in the social context.
- b) to develop creatively, principally in the field of culture, a socio-political program, in order to further the concept of equality, democracy and socialism in the arts.
- c) to function as a structure which engenders and facilitates the development of a membership which initiates and maintains its own activities, develops its own policies and is responsible for its own productivity.

d) to present to the public art exhibitions and performances, literary presentations, photographic, film and video displays, dramatic, dance and musical performances and productions of all kinds, organized and produced by the membership.

e) to liaise with, to correspond with and to co-produce with the Canadian and international communities the aforesaid activities.

f) to publish a magazine and or newsletter which will be a vehicle of information and criticism.

g) to acquire by ownership, lease, license, association or any other means, suitable accommodations and facilities for the furtherance of the aforesaid functions.

h) to solicit or raise money, to receive, acquire and hold gifts, donations, bequests and grants to be used solely in the furtherance of the aforesaid functions, to undertake and execute any trusts which may be conducive to the aforesaid functions.

By-Laws

The by-laws of the society are those set out in Schedule B of the SOCIETY ACT, with the following additions:

I. Under Part 3 – Meetings of members

The directors may convene a general meeting when any of the functions of the society becomes misused or non-productive, in order that the membership may decide whether to continue the function.

II. Under Part 7 – Duties of officers

All members of the board of directors excluding the president, the vice-president and the secretary-treasurer, shall be a member of one of the committees in a liaison role.

Relevant Publications



Exhibition To Be Destroyed, Again: Selections From The Unit/Pitt Archives, 1979-1984

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The Helen Pitt archives are mostly in storage. Early documents related to Unit 306 and early exhibitions at the Unit 306 space are currently being gathered from the community. A selection of early documents have been digitized, along with a complete list of artists and exhibitions, will be available on the helenpittgallery.org web site.

About the Author

Allison Collins is a Contributing Editor for ArcPost. She is an independent curator and writer based in Vancouver.

[Contact](#) Unit/Pitt